

Spending the Day with God sermon series  
#4 – Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep  
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One of the things I love about having children is when they go to bed each night. What I mean by that is I enjoy the bedtime rituals that go along with it. Brushing the teeth, praying together, reading a book. Molly has a certain ritual that involves spraying “monster spray” in her room, which is actually just a bottle of Leigh’s hair spray. We have to do two spritzes in her room and one on her paper guardian angel that hangs over her bed. Let me tell you, after a couple years of monster spray, that’s the best coiffed guardian angel in Illinois.

Like most kids, my girls also have nightlights in their room. They need that protection and assurance against the dark. Interestingly, so did the Israelites. As Moses led them away from Egypt, you’ll notice that God was with them during the day as a pillar of cloud and at night was present as a pillar of fire, never leaving the people. God was the first night light.

Why do we need night lights? Because darkness is scary. It symbolizes the unknown and we tend to worry more about what we can’t see than what we can. And our culture preys upon that fear. I remember a popular kids’ television show in the 90s was “Are You Afraid of the Dark?” In the “Star Wars” movies, the bad guys belong to the “dark side” of the force. Poet Dylan Thomas wrote, “Do not go gentle into that good night; rage, rage against the dying of the light.” We don’t like the night.

Darkness is also where we are most vulnerable, where we have the least amount of control. Often in the Bible God would come to people in dreams because I believe it was the only time God could get a word in. Jacob dreams about a ladder of angels and in a dream another angel tells Joseph that his fiancée Mary is expecting. Dreams can be fertile ground for experiencing God.

But even our dreams are exploited for their fear factor. Movies like “Monsters Inc.” and books like “Where the Wild Things Are” send the message that when we close our eyes, we expose ourselves to the creepy crawlies of the night, the Boogeymen who lurk in the shadows. I remember one night I was spending the night at my grandparents’ house and in their room at the foot of their bed. Just as I was drifting off to sleep I swore I felt a hand touch my shoulder. I screamed and jumped up. Somehow my grandparents managed not to have heart attacks. My grandfather turned on all the lights and searched the house, but of course no one was there. The next day we bought a night light.

While we’ve been conditioned to see end of the day as fraught with fear, I believe God calls us to see the end of the day in a different light, so to speak. As we finish our sermon series today on “Spending the Day with God,” I want us to consider other perspectives on the coming of “that good night.”

When I was younger I wasn’t happy to see darkness fall, not only because of my childish fears but because it meant the fun of the day was over. Now, as an adult and a parent and a wage-earner, I welcome the end of the day. After whatever morning quiet time I’m given, I hit the ground running and usually don’t stop until the girls are finally put to bed with their night lights on. There’s nothing scary about that time for me!

But I believe the anxiety the night brings goes deeper than just the end of the day. We adults bring our own Boogeymen with us into the dark of night. The coming of the night is not just the time for summing up one day but also a reminder of our mortality. At some point in our lives, our days will ultimately end and night will settle in permanently for our time here on earth. You remember the children's prayer? "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Nothing says "Sweet dreams" like a nice prayer about dying in your sleep. No wonder we need night lights!

Each day, as the time winds down and our bodies prepare to rest, we close our eyes, trusting that we'll open them again the next morning. A few months ago, I woke up in the night with a terrible case of heartburn, the first time I've ever had it. As I lay there with these mysterious chest pains, I remember thinking, "What if this is it? What if I won't see the sun again? Did I do everything I wanted to do? Did I say everything to people I wanted to say?" Each time we close our eyes, we are assuming that we will open them again. I wonder if we take that for granted.

I've found that as I've gotten older, a lot of my anxiety about the nighttime is not caused by what could happen in the coming night, but by what didn't happen during the day. We stay so busy that often times when we get to the evening we don't intentionally stop to rest so much as we just run out of gas. If we could, many of us would keep on going well into the night because we know there is so much still to be done. I said a few weeks ago that often my first thoughts in the morning are about my to-do list. I believe that's because my last thoughts the night before are of the same thing.

And yet, what God offers us each night is a chance to release whatever burdens we bring with us to the night. Whatever went wrong, whatever unfortunate words were spoken, whatever resentments were harbored, the night is a chance to let them go. In my efforts to stay healthy, I've noticed that I weigh less in the morning than I do at night. So guess when I do all my weighing? You could argue that drop in weight is because I go all night without eating, but I have to wonder what other burdens I'm letting go of that makes me a little lighter in the morning.

I went to see a movie when I was young called "The Neverending Story." I liked it well enough until about halfway through the movie, when the name of the film struck me. "The Neverending Story." Oh my gosh! I'll never get out of here! I'll never see my parents again! I'll have to subsist on popcorn and coke for the rest of my life! I find it a bit ironic that they made "The Neverending Story II."

I think Moses can help us out here. After schlepping the Israelites around the wilderness for 40 years, Moses is finally on the cusp of the Promised Land, ready to enter into the territory God has been promising for generations. Except Moses can't go in. He disobeyed God many years back, and because of that, God has restricted Moses from entering the Promised Land. Moses dies on Mt. Nebo, literally overlooking the abundant land which he has been forbidden from entering. It's a bit like going to sleep with things still left on your to-do list.

For Moses, that's where his day and his days ended, on the mountaintop overlooking the Promised Land. And it's not only his story that ends here. It's also the end of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The Torah doesn't end with the Israelites frolicking in the land of milk and honey; you have to wait until the book of

Joshua for that. No, the Torah, which for a long time *was* the Bible, ends poised on the edge of the Promised Land, not in it.

The reality is that at the end of each day, there is unfinished business. I've ended many days thinking, "If I just had a little more time, I could get done all I wanted to get done." Which of course is only a rationalization on my part, because as soon as I finished what I thought was the last thing, there will be three more things to be done, and I'll sleep terribly worrying about them. Maybe it's a task that didn't get done; maybe it's a phone call that didn't get made; maybe it's time with someone that didn't get spent; maybe it's a word of thanks or forgiveness that didn't get spoken. Each day we live will be imperfect. Even those most glorious of days will have their blemishes.

And ultimately, we are powerless to change that. What we do have the power to do is to turn to God, our constant companion during the day, and say, "You know? This day was OK. Some good, some bad. Thanks for being there with me. Help me to do better tomorrow. Better yet, help me *be* better tomorrow." When we close our eyes, our hope and our trust is that we will have a tomorrow when we can set the record straight and say things a little calmer, smarter, or kinder, a tomorrow when we can finish working on the unfinished business, a day when we can continue living our never-ending story.

For Christians, that's more than just a movie title. Dylan Thomas' phrase "the dying of the light" isn't in our vocabulary. Do you remember what happened at Jesus' crucifixion? Matthew says, "From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, darkness came over the land." And then Christ died. Darkness had won.

But God had some unfinished business. And in three days, the light shone again in such a way that darkness was defeated forever. We have no reason to fear the dark because the Light of the World has come to us. As St. Clement said, "Christ turns all our sunsets into dawn."

So we come to the end of our day. We've welcomed God into our lives in the morning, walking with God during the day, and placed our trust in God as we close our eyes at night. Was it a perfect day? No. None of them are. But because God was with us, it was a good day. That's a good reason to rejoice, give thanks, and prepare to start a new day tomorrow. Thanks be to God.